Sweet Venom
Tera Lynn Childs

# SWEET VENOM

TERA LYNN CHILDS

# Dedication

*For Shane, mentor . . . inspiration . . . friend*

# Chapter 1
# Gretchen

Hydras have a distinctive odor. It's somewhere between the acid tang of burning hair and a boat full of rotting fish. You can smell them from miles away.

Well, you can't. But I can.

Some beasties smell mildly unpleasant; others could peel paint. Hydras definitely fall into the latter category.

As I steer my car—Moira, named for the fickle fates as a constant reminder to take charge of mine—into a spot across from a dilapidated seafood shack, the stench is practically overwhelming. Moira's upholstery is going to stink for a week. I pencil in taking her to the car wash on my mental to-do list, right after replacing my favorite cargo pants, which got shredded in my last fight, but before polishing the bladed weapons in the armory.

I twist the key out of the ignition and do a quick gear check: Kevlar wrist cuffs in place, smoke bombs in left cargo pocket, zip ties in the right, and my handy-dandy, military-grade, metal detector–defying, twin APS daggers snug in their sheaths and hidden inside my steel-toe Doc Martens. Nothing like a well-stocked pair of black cargoes to make me feel girly.

The hydra shouldn't be much trouble—balancing nine heads on a massive serpent body throws off their center of gravity so they're not exactly graceful—but it never hurts to be prepared.

Even if I ever get caught off guard, I've got a backup monster-fighting kit stowed under Moira's driver's seat and another in my backpack.

Though the gear makes things easier, all I really need to take a beastie out is the pair of retracted canines that will fang down at the first sign of trouble. They're my built-in secret weapon. A defense legacy passed down from my ancient ancestor.

“Seriously,” I mutter as I climb out onto the sidewalk. “Can’t they give it a rest for a while? Maybe take an extended vacation somewhere cold and icy.”

This is the fourth time in the last week that the aroma of dark and nasty has pulled me out for the hunt.

One more visitor from the abyss this week and I’ll leave the gear at home and work out my annoyance with my fists. Hand-to-hand combat won’t send a monster back to its prison-realm home, but it’ll make me feel a hell of a lot better. Who says keeping the human world monster-free can’t be good therapy at the same time?

I palm the remote for Moira’s keyless entry and am about to lock her sleek, black doors when I realize I’ve forgotten one element of my monster-fighting gear that is critical, at least when I’m hunting in human-heavy territory.

“Slick, Gretchen,” I tell myself. “Real slick.”

You’d think after four years—a quarter of my life—this would be second nature.

Moments later, I’m crossing the street, my sporty mirrored sunglasses shielding my eyes. Not from the sun, of course. It’s not like hydras yearn for daylight. No, they’d rather drag me out in the middle of the night, when dives like this are the only thing open.

Darn inconsiderate when school starts tomorrow.

I walk up to the weathered wooden shack, peer through the dirt- and grime-crusted window, and scan the late-night diners. All distinctly human.

If my eyes weren’t practically tearing at the stench, I’d think the hydra wasn’t here.

Then I catch sight of the narrow staircase off to the right of the bar, leading to an upstairs dining room. Well, at least that will make cornering it easier.

As I push open the door, the combination of putrid eau de hydra and decades of fried-fish-filet residue is enough to make me nearly lose my heat-and-eat lasagna all over the sandy floor.

But I don’t have time for nausea. There’s a bloodthirsty monster prowling for a meal, and if I don’t stop it, no one will. I’m the only one who can see it.

“Anyone see a slithering nine-headed serpent pass this way?”

I snicker. I would love to see the reaction if I actually asked the question loud enough for anyone to hear.

Then again, this is San Francisco. They might not react at all.

Bypassing the drowsy bartender, I head for the staircase. Monsters generally prefer dark corners and back alleys—and, apparently, second-floor dining areas—which makes them occasionally harder to find but easier to attack. They'll take any less-populated area that's available, though, which is fine by me. The fewer witnesses to our fights, the better. The safer. The human world doesn't need to know monsters walk among them. As long as I do my job right, they never will.

I'm up the stairs, three at a time, in five seconds flat. The instant I step out onto the second floor, I see it, cozying up to a trampy redhead doing her best impersonation of a low-class prostitute. Monsters have the worst taste in women.

I scan the room, checking for potential threats and exits. Besides the stairs behind me, there's an emergency exit at the back. If I position myself behind the redhead, I'll be able to intercept on either path.

As for threats, there's a pair of mounted swordfish displayed on the wall and some framed pictures of deep-sea fishing boats that might hurt if used as projectiles. Nothing really to worry about.

Thankfully, the dining area is sparsely populated. Other than the hydra and its prey there is only a trio of drunken businessmen at the far end. Judging from their raucous volume and the disheveled state of their ties, odds are they're probably pretty much oblivious to anything but the next round. If I do this right, they won't notice a thing.

Straightening my back, I march over to the unlucky couple and tap the girl on the shoulder, making sure I'm centered between the stairs and the door.

"Can I help you?" Red snaps in a very nonsolicitous tone.

"Yes," I reply. "You can leave."

"Excuse me?" She crosses her arms defiantly under her chest, like I'm going to be frightened away by her aggressive boobage. "I don't know who you think you are, but—"

With a quick flick of my wrist, I pop my sunglasses up and lean down to look her directly in the eye.

"You were just leaving," I say, keeping my tone even.

Her eyes widen as her brain disengages. “I was just leaving,” she repeats.

Then, as if pulled by some unseen rope, she stands and crosses to the stairs, disappearing out of view. When the hypno wears off, she’ll wonder how she got wherever she’s going. But serpent-beastie will be long gone by then.

With the girl safely out of the way, I evaluate the now standing hydra. From the necks down it looks like an overgrown lizard who’s been hitting the gym. Too muscular for my taste—I don’t go for the bulging reptilian type—but I can see how some girls might want to hit that. From the necks up . . . well, whoever said two heads are better than one never met a hydra.

Too bad humans can’t see its real form.

All monsters can affect a sort of false appearance—in faerie circles known as a glamour—so their hideous, grotesque features are hidden from unsuspecting human eyes. Unfortunately for the monsters, I’m not an unsuspecting human. I’m a descendant of Medusa, and I suspect a whole heck of a lot. My eyes see their true nature, and this beastie’s true nature is a slimy, scaly, nine-headed snake. Not exactly the perfect specimen Red thought she was getting.

The hydra’s eyes lock on mine before I drop my sunglasses back into place. Too bad my freaky hypnosis power only works on humans. Then again, that would make my job way too easy. Where’s the fun in that?

“Huntress,” it snarls.

“I prefer Gretchen. But, you know.” I flash it a bored look. “Whatever.”

The freak show moves awkwardly, its undulating tail taking out a couple of chairs.

I check over my shoulder to make sure the drunken trio hasn’t noticed—they haven’t—then turn back to face my foe. It might look big and scary, but this isn’t my first hydra rodeo. I know just how to take it down.

As the freak show reaches for me, I spin right, dodging the grab and sending the monster lurching forward. With the creature off-balance, I take a well-aimed leap onto its back. It writhes, trying to throw me off. I wrap my legs around the scaly body and my arms around one of the necks and squeeze. The table goes flying. I need to hurry, before someone decides to notice all the noise.

Inching my way down its back, I lean off to one side, searching for the spot where its thick, armorlike scales give way to a softer underbelly. My fangs drop. I dive forward, sink my fangs into the tender flesh, and sigh as my snake-girl venom pours into its bloodstream.

There is no better feeling than this sweet surge of victory.

In a flash, it’s gone and I’m thudding to my knees on the floor.

Bye-bye beastie.

# Chapter 2
# Grace

Things are going to be different in San Francisco. I mean, obviously things *are* different—like the mega-tall buildings, the millions of people, and the predominance of concrete over grass. This town is pretty much the complete opposite of Orangevale in every way.

But I want Grace Whitfield—*me*—to be different too.

Frozen like a statue on the sidewalk, I stare up at the imposing facade of Alpha Academy, the private prep school whose full-scholarship offer is half the reason we've moved to the city. It's a giant cube of glass and steel, a monument to modernity that makes the simple single-story stucco and Spanish tile of Orangevale High look like something from California's prehistoric past. This building gleams shiny and new in the morning sun. The perfect place to start over. I know this is the opportunity I've been waiting for all my life. After sixteen years in the same small burb, going to the same schools with the same students, I finally get to be someone new. Someone not me.

Before I can smile at the thought, a person knocks into my shoulder, sending me and my backpack tumbling.

"Excuse you much?" The girl gives me a disgusted look, dusts off her shoulder like I might have given her a virus, and stomps off toward the sparkling glass double doors.

Everything about her screams *confident*. Rich brown hair with auburn highlights that swings as she walks, dark-wash skinny jeans and a magenta V-neck sweater that cling to every single curve, and (most of all) the superior-to-absolutely-everyone attitude. Just as different from me as San Francisco is from Orangevale.

The new me should say something to her retreating back. I *want* to say something like *No, excuse* you *much*, since she, you know, crashed into me.

But I don’t. I stand there, watching her disappear into my new school, a huge lump of dread in my stomach at the realization that nothing has changed. I’m still the same old Grace, the quiet, passive pushover who can’t stand up for herself.

So much for different.

“Grace Whitfield?”

I look up from my spot on the bench across from the guidance counselor’s office. The counselor, the woman who just called my name, gives me an encouraging smile.

She looks nothing like the balding, middle-aged, tweed coat–wearing counselor in Orangevale. The one who’d rubber-stamped all my advising sessions and handed me the appropriate papers about SAT prep classes before checking off my name and moving on to the next kid on the list. Not that I needed his help—I know what I have to do to get into a good school and earn a scholarship—but it might have been nice if he’d looked up from his computer for two seconds.

My new counselor has all of her attention focused on me, and commands my attention in return. I can’t help but study her immaculate appearance. She’s tall and graceful, like a ballerina, and wears a sharply tailored skirt suit in a soft, warm gray that matches her high heels. A petal-pink blouse ruffles out around her lapels. Although her image says poised and elegant, I get the feeling that beneath the surface she is a woman of extraordinary strength.

She seems like she could run a billion-dollar company in her spare time. She would never let anyone plow over her and march off without a word. I’m an eco-geek who can’t even walk into my new school without getting trampled by another student.

I stand, feeling awkward and underdressed in my recycled jeans, organic green tee, and hot-pink Chuck Taylors. Not only because of the counselor, but also because of confident girl and the few students who’ve trickled in through the office while I’ve been waiting. They look like they walked out of a department-store window display.

Too late to change now. Besides, it’s not like I have high levels of fashion hiding in my closet. Mostly more of the same.

“I’m Grace,” I say, extending my hand.

I expect her to shake it, formal and businesslike, but instead she holds it gently and presses her other palm over mine. Her smile positively sparkles. She gives me a squeeze as she says, “I’m Ms. West. I recommended you for the scholarship here at Alpha. You shone above all the other applicants. Your computer skills were especially impressive.”

“I—” I swallow over the strange feeling of tightness—of pride, maybe—in my throat. A good feeling. “Thank you.”

“After reviewing your admissions exam and your previous school records, I have prepared a preliminary class schedule for you,” she explains as she motions me into her office.

I rub my hands against my jeans as I follow her inside.

Other than the small acrylic sign on her desk that says STEPHANIE WEST, GUIDANCE COUNSELOR, the sleek gray surface is virtually empty. In fact, the office is pretty much empty. Only the desk, chairs, a pair of tall file cabinets, and, on the wall behind her desk, a massive framed photo of a beautiful white sand beach and a turquoise sea. No clutter, no color other than the water in the picture. It’s very calming. Which is, I suppose, a good quality in a counselor’s office.

Ms. West lowers herself gracefully into the big black leather office chair, indicating that I should take a seat in one of the armchairs facing her desk. I choose the one on the right, swinging my backpack to the floor as I sit.

“Considering your plans to attend a top-tier college,” she says, handing me a sheet of paper, “I thought you might be interested in adding a second foreign language.”

“Do you think that’s necessary?” I ask. “Will it help my admissions chances?”

“It certainly doesn’t hurt.” She looks me in the eye as she speaks. “But I think your transcript is strong already.”

“Then I think I’ll stick with Spanish.” I appreciate her honest answer.

“All right,” she says. “What about a physical education class? We offer a broad selection, including virtually all sports, as well as kickboxing and Tae Kwon Do.”

My records must not have been too enlightening, because she clearly doesn’t get me at all. Give me a laptop or a smartphone, and I’m an all-star, but athletics is a bit beyond my skill set. I’m not a superklutz or anything,

I'm merely lacking in the finer points of hand-eye coordination beyond basic keyboard functions.

When I shake my head again, she pulls out a folder from her desk drawer and opens it, turning to a sheet of green paper near the back.

"Alpha is dedicated to providing our students with a well-rounded education in a variety of disciplines, not focused exclusively on rigorous academics." She smiles as she scans the paper. "The elective opportunities are truly astounding. I'm sure you will find something to your liking."

The green sheet she hands me must have almost fifty classes listed.

The choices are a little overwhelming. At Orangevale High we had your standard math, language arts, sciences, history, foreign languages (Spanish or French), and one elective. Our elective choices were limited to art, choir, band, or study hall. It's hard to wrap my public-school brain around the array of private-school electives. "I don't know. I guess, maybe—"

"You don't have to decide right now," she interrupts. "Orientation and convocation will take up most of today. Why don't you take the list home and decide tonight? You can come by before school and let me know what courses you've chosen."

"Great," I say as I slip the paper into my backpack.

We spend the next few minutes going over the schedule for today, my core class schedule for tomorrow, graduation and extracurricular requirements, and things like dress code and attendance policies. Mom, Dad, and I already filled out a mountain of paperwork over the summer—hasn't this school heard of electronic forms?—but there are still a few for me to sign.

I wonder if my brother, Thane, is going through the same thing at his school.

"Are you ready for your first day at Alpha?" Ms. West asks with an enthusiastic smile.

I take a deep breath. *Am* I ready? New home, new city, new school, new friends. Hopefully. New life. New me.

I feel equal parts fear and anticipation. But one look in Ms. West's sharp eyes and I feel a jolt of confidence. I feel strong and invincible. How can I let myself be afraid of change, when it's what I want? The chance to become the strong, confident young woman I've always dreamed of being.

This is the first step.

“Yes,” I say, gathering my courage. “Ready.”

“Do you have any questions or concerns before I send you to class?”

I square my shoulders and shake my head. I’m ready for this.

“If you need anything,” she says, “my office door is always open.”

I nod, trying to mimic the same air of self-assurance she exudes, as if I appreciate her offer but will never need the help because everything will work out in no time. The facade makes me feel a little more sure of myself, of my future at Alpha and in San Francisco.

The power of positive thinking.

She leans out into the hall. “Miranda, would you come here please?”

When Miranda shows up at Ms. West’s door, my false confidence quivers and that sense of dread plops into my stomach again.

“Yes, Ms. West?” asks the girl who plowed through me in front of the school.

“This is Grace Whitfield,” she explains, gesturing to me. “She’s new at Alpha. Since you two have the same homeroom, I thought you might give her a quick tour and then show her to class.”

“Of course,” Miranda says with a blinding fake smile. “It’d be my pleasure.”

*Think positive*, I tell myself. Maybe I misinterpreted her earlier comment. Maybe she’s a really nice person. Maybe she’ll be friendly, now that she knows we share a class. Hitch-ing my backpack up on my shoulder, I smile and hold out my hand. “Nice to meet you, Miranda.”

She smiles and shakes my hand. For a second I believe this positive thinking thing really works. Then, as soon as Ms. West turns back to her desk, Miranda drops my hand like it’s a plague-ridden rat, rolls her eyes, and stalks out of the office.

My shoulders sink.

“Have a wonderful first day,” Ms. West says.

“Thanks,” I say, turning to give her a quick wave before following after Miranda’s retreating back.

As I stand outside the girls’ bathroom, waiting for Miranda to emerge, I’m pretty certain this isn’t what Ms. West had in mind for a school tour. After throwing me a look that said she’d rather eat glass than lead around a loser

like me, Miranda stalked off into the hall outside the main office and made a beeline for the bathroom.

She's been in there for over five minutes.

I glance at my schedule. Every day at Alpha begins with homeroom, an hour-long period for finishing up homework, going to the library, or seeking help from other teachers. Nothing like the twenty-minute roll call and stay-in-your-seats-for-announcements madness that passed for homeroom at Orangevale. Homeroom here sounds useful.

Around me, the hall is starting to fill with students. The typical first-day-of-school insanity. Girls are shrieking, diving into group hugs with friends they haven't seen all summer. A few couples are taking advantage of the chaos to engage in some pretty inappropriate kissing and groping. Some kids, probably freshmen, are wandering around looking slightly lost and terribly frightened. That won't be me—I won't let it. I'm a junior now, an upperclassman, and I'm not going to let the unfamiliar environment make me feel like a lowly freshman again. No thank you.

I've never been a Girl Scout, I don't even know their motto, but I still believe in being prepared. I swing my backpack around and dig through the pile of papers Ms. West gave me until I find the school map printed on the back of the "Welcome to Alpha!" letter. According to my schedule, I have Mrs. Deckler for homeroom in room 117.

After tracing my finger over most of the ground floor, I find room 117 in a back corner. I squint at the map—it's no 3D-rendered interactive virtual environment, but it'll do—and then scan the hall, deciding that if I go to the end of the main hall and turn left, I'll find my classroom.

Miranda's still in the bathroom though. And, as much as I think she'd be overjoyed to find me gone, I don't want to pull a disappearing flake act on the first day.

I continue studying my map, trying to get a feel for the layout of the school, mentally extruding the walls and creating an image of the building in my mind. There are four floors, with the upper levels reserved for grades five through eight. All of my classes will be on the first two floors, so I focus on those maps. It's when I'm scanning over my current location that I see what—after waiting ten minutes—I should have already guessed. The girls' bathroom has two entrances.

With a groan, I zip my backpack shut and head down the hall toward room 117, clutching my map and schedule. I don't need to pop into the bathroom to know that Miranda's long gone.

I follow the gleaming white hall past open classrooms and walls of lockers. At the end, I make a left, proud of my map-reading skills. Four doors later I find Mrs. Deckler's class.

And I'm not at all surprised to find Miranda already in her desk when I walk into the room.

Pausing for a second in the doorway, I give myself a little pep talk.

*This is it*, I tell myself. *This is the moment to leave doormat Grace behind and become . . . fearless Grace.* Confident *Grace*. If I take the offensive, I can turn this moment around. I can make sure that my time at Alpha isn't spent feeling powerless. I take a deep breath, form the words of a biting, witty comment in my mind, and open my mouth.

"Did you get lost?" Miranda asks before I can utter a sound. "I waited outside the bathroom for like ten minutes."

"I—" How do I respond to that? A complete and total lie. "What?"

She leans forward, as if to say something confidential, but her whisper is anything but quiet. "Are you constipated? Nurse Callahan probably has some laxatives or something."

Most of the dozen or so kids in the half-full classroom erupt in barely concealed snorts and giggles. Whatever reputation-establishing comment I'd been about to make completely evaporates into abject humiliation. My cheeks burn to the point of combustion. My ears quickly follow. Every life-changing hope I had bursts like a bubble hitting concrete. There is no recovering from a comment like that. Ever.

Tales of my digestive distress will probably circulate throughout the school by lunchtime. Even freshmen will feel sorry for me, while being thankful it's not them being thrown under the social bus.

I do the only thing I can do; I duck my head and hurry to the back of the classroom. Slipping into an empty desk, I make myself as small and invisible as humanly possible.

"Miranda is a vortex of evil."

I look up from being preoccupied with my backpack—aka pretending to be too busy to notice the stares and snickers—to find the girl in the next desk over studiously doodling on her spiral-bound.

“I’m sorry?” I ask, not sure she actually said something.

She jerks her head, sending a wave of black hair with white tips in Miranda’s general direction at the front of the room. “Never apologize for Miranda bashing. It’s my favorite pastime.”

“Oh.” Looks like I’m not the only person on the receiving end of Miranda’s bad attitude.

“I see we’re trying out a new hairstyle to start the school year, Vail.” The teacher behind the big wooden desk smiles at the girl next to me. “Shall we expect new colors weekly?”

Vail shrugs and goes back to her drawings.

As Mrs. Deckler enlists Miranda’s help to hand out some paperwork, I lean slightly to my left and say, “I’m Grace Whitfield.”

The only indication that she hears me is a momentary pause in the motion of her pencil. A hesitation over the next eye socket in a sea of skulls and crossbones. Then, as Miranda passes between us and *accidentally* drops my paper onto the floor, my neighbor mutters, “Suck a lemon, Sanders.”

“Couldn’t afford to dye all your hair, Vail?” Miranda pretends to carefully set a paper on Vail’s desk before sending it sailing into the aisle. “Next time I’ll lend you the fifty cents.”

“Save it for your implants fund.”

Vail flashes a sympathetic look at Miranda’s less-than-overflowing chest. A giggle escapes before I can help it. I smack a hand over my mouth when Miranda spears me with a death look. Then, apparently deciding to pretend to take the high road, she stalks off. Vail goes back to her doodling. I swallow my laughter.

“I wish I could do that.” I sigh.

“What?”

“Tell off girls like that,” I explain, leaning down to grab both our papers off the floor. “My mind always freezes.”

For several long moments I think she’s not going to respond. Her attention is fully focused on filling in the spaces between her skulls and crossbones with smiley faces. As I set her paper on the edge of her desk, I notice that the smiley faces have fangs.

I shrug and start reading over my paper, a pretty standard set of classroom rules.

Mrs. Deckler gets up and clears her throat like she's going to start reading the rules or something, and Vail finally says, "Standing up to Miranda is easy." She pulls the rules sheet on top of her notebook and turns her doodling attention to the pink handout. "You just have to stop caring what she thinks."

As Mrs. Deckler starts droning on about attendance policies and how to ask for a library or study pass, I sink farther into my desk. That's my problem. I can't *stop* caring what the Mirandas of the world think of me.

Unless something dramatic happens, San Francisco Grace is going to have pretty much the same experience as Orangevale Grace. Guess I'll have to get used to doormat status.

# Chapter 3
# Grace

My head bounces against the window as the city bus hits a pothole. At this point, accidentally getting knocked unconscious would give me a welcome excuse for forgetting my first day at Alpha. Is a little amnesia too much to ask for?

Except for the mild welcome from Vail in homeroom, the rest of the day has gone pretty much according to Miranda's evil plan. Why didn't I stand up to her when I had the chance? Too bad real life doesn't have Pause and Rewind. My first day would have gone infinitely better if I could have stopped time long enough to think up a comeback for Miranda's snark.

Instead, I spent all day replaying the moment in my mind.

The bus driver announces my stop. Slinging my backpack over my shoulder, I stand and move to the back doors. I'm about to step down into the stairwell when the bus pulls away from the curb. I hold on to a pole to keep from flying into a little old Chinese lady's lap. The bag in her arms squirms, and I'm half afraid there's a live chicken in there.

"Excuse me," I say, trying to get the driver's attention.

He ignores me, continuing through the intersection and to the next stop, where another passenger pushes past me out the door. I hurry down the steps and leap to the sidewalk before the bus can take off again. Guess I'm too used to school bus drivers, who are required to make sure you get off at your stop. City bus drivers don't seem to care.

As I trudge the extra two uphill blocks back to our street, I make a mental list of anything good that happened today. I know Mom is going to ask, and I want her to think everything's great.

Let's see, there was Vail in homeroom. She didn't exactly go out of her way to be friendly, but she wasn't horribly rude, either. Which is more than I can say about the rest of Alpha. That's something.

There was the counselor, Ms. West, who seemed pretty cool. Mrs. Deckler was nice too, and already knew I'd have English with her in addition to homeroom. Counselors and teachers in Orangevale never cared that much.

And I have a whole world of electives to choose from. I browsed them at lunch—having no one to eat with, I slipped away to the library to eat my avocado-and-sprouts sandwich alone—and narrowed down my selection to about five choices. With no first-day-of-school homework, picking my electives is my main task for the night.

I reach our block, and while I dig out my key ring, I try to focus on the positive. Mom worries, and I don't want her to think I'm unhappy at the new school. Even if I am.

No, I have to give it more than a day. Tomorrow could be infinitely better. It can hardly be worse. I can't act *less* confident.

In Orangevale I never had to use house keys. Mom was always home, the door unlocked, ready with an after-school snack. Our building in San Francisco is a multistory U-shaped thing with a locked front gate leading into the courtyard and a locked main entrance. The only ways inside are using a key, getting buzzed in by a tenant, or sneaking in after someone else. I tried that last one the first day in town and got a dirty look from one of our neighbors, so I don't think I'll be using the sneaking-in technique again.

The key turns easily in the lock and the gate swings open with a high-pitched squeak. I make sure it closes and locks behind me before heading toward the door. I love the courtyard. It's full of shady trees and brightly colored tropical flowers that smell like I've always imagined Hawaii would. A little piece of paradise in the big city.

At the lime-green front door I flip to another key on my ring. Everything —the door, the trees, the flowers—is a stark contrast of color against the bright white of the building rising up on three sides. Too bad the interior isn't as vibrant and cheerful.

I head into the gloomy hallway, with its dark wood floor and insufficient lighting. It creeps me out a little. Too many shadows and hidden corners.

I hurry to the stairwell and run to the second floor. After one near-death experience in the classic—aka creaky and ancient—elevator, I've decided I could use the exercise of taking the stairs.

At our apartment door, I select the third and final key on my ring and burst inside. My rotten day forgotten, I set my backpack on the dining table and follow the smell of brownies to the kitchen.

“Mom, I’m home!” I shout, grabbing a still-warm treat from the piled-high plate on the counter.

She emerges from the back hall wearing paint-spattered jeans and a matching smock. Since we’ve been in the apartment only a little over a week, she’s still finishing up the decorating and unpacking. Judging from the shade of soft taupe dominating her clothes, I’d guess she’s tackling the master bedroom today.

“So . . .” she prods with a huge smile on her round face, “how was your first day? Tell me everything.”

As a rule, I don’t lie to my parents. I don’t even usually keep things from them. We’re very close, and I want it to stay that way. But this move has been difficult in so many ways—the long family talks after I got the scholarship, the concerns about uprooting me and Thane in the middle of our high school careers, the last-minute decision that meant a last-minute move. If Dad hadn’t gotten that promotion to the San Francisco office, we’d still be in Orangevale.

Now Dad’s working crazy hours, and I know Mom is still stressed about everything. I don’t want her worrying that we’ve made the wrong decision, which is why I smile and say, “It was great. I think Alpha is going to be really good for me.”

“Thank goodness,” she says, ignoring her freshly painted state and rushing forward to wrap me in a tight Mom hug. “I was so worried.”

“And all for nothing,” I tease. Mission accomplished. Mom is relieved, which means the smile on my face isn’t as forced as it was a minute ago. “You’ve got brownie in your hair.”

She runs her fingers through her black-brown waves. “Did I get it?”

“I’m not sure,” I say, leaning in to inspect. “I can’t tell under all that paint.”

“Ha ha.” She teasingly smacks me on the shoulder. “Not funny.”

I shrug. “I thought it was.”

She steps around me into the kitchen and heads for the sink.

“And you found the bus and everything easily enough?” she asks over her shoulder.

“Mmm-hmmm,” I say around my mouthful of brownie. Mom doesn’t need to know about the bad bus driver any more than she needs to know about Miranda or my solo lunch in the library.

Mom busies herself with washing the few dishes in the sink while I finish my brownie. Moist, chocolaty goodness. The perfect cure for my disappointing day.

I pour myself a glass of pineapple Fanta to wash down the last crumbs.

“Where’s Thane?” I ask after a big gulp. “Isn’t he home yet?”

“The public schools have a later schedule. He gets out twenty minutes after you,” she answers, drying her hands on a kitchen towel. “He should be home soon. Do you need anything?”

“Nope, I’m good.”

“Okay, then I’ll get back to my painting.” Her smile is thrilled but weary. She’s excited to be making over the apartment, but also exhausted. “Shout if you need anything.”

“Want some help?” I offer. With no homework to do, I need something to distract me from the mental replay of today’s lowlights.

“That’s sweet,” she says, “but I’m almost done.” At my skeptical look, she adds, “Really.”

“You’re sure?” When she nods, I say, “Okay.” I refill my Fanta and head for the dining table.

I pull out the packet of Alpha Academy papers the counselor gave me this morning and dig for the electives lists. I have to choose two, in addition to Spanish, and the first one is easy. I don’t boast about it much, but I’m a bit of a computer geek. Okay, I’m a serious computer geek. Ever since I got my first laptop in third grade, I’ve been fascinated by computers and technology. It’s my dream to work for one of the big software companies someday.

I circle Computer Science on the list.

The other elective, however, is a harder choice.

At lunch I marked stars next to Journalism and Yearbook. I’ve always been intrigued by the media. I don’t have any experience, but I’m sure I could learn the necessary programs easily enough. But then this afternoon I overheard someone say that Miranda is social editor on the school paper, and I don’t need that conflict. I erase the star next to journalism.

For some reason I also starred Ancient Greek and Tae Kwon Do. When Ms. West suggested languages and athletics this morning, they didn't sound appealing at all. But as I read over the list, they started to look kind of interesting. Now, in the quiet of our apartment, they seem weird again. When would I ever use Greek? And my trying martial arts would probably only lead to injury—mine or someone else's. I erase both stars.

The last star is on Pottery and Sculpture. When I was in elementary school, I always loved art classes when we got to be hands-on with clay. I was never any good at it, but it was fun. It might be a nice reprieve from the rigorous academics at Alpha. It wouldn't do anything for my college applications, though.

I'm about to erase the remaining stars and circle Yearbook when the lock on the front door clicks open. There is no other sound, just the whisper of a breeze against my back as the door soundlessly swings open. I know it's Thane. No one moves as quietly as my brother. He's like a ninja cat burglar.

If we paired his stealth with my computer skills, we could be an epic spy team.

"Hey, Thane," I say without turning around. I draw a dark circle around my elective choice. "How was school?"

"Fine."

Did I mention that Thane isn't big on talking either? Some days I think he's a recovering mime. But I know he's just really thoughtful. He spends a lot of time in his head. He also has some emotional baggage—protective walls that none of us have been able to fully crack. We chip pieces away from time to time, but mostly his life before he came to live with us is a well-guarded mystery.

"You must be Grace," another, brighter boy voice says. "Thane told me all about you."

Jerking back from the table and nearly knocking my chair over, I turn to see who Thane has brought home.

My breath catches in my throat.

The boy standing at my brother's side is, in a word, adorable. I'm completely struck. He's taller than Thane by a couple of inches, making him about six foot. His dark hair falls in haphazard curls over his brow, his ears, and the collar of his rugby shirt. His eyes are a pale mint green with a

light-brown ring around the pupil. And his mouth is spread in a wide, curving smile, showing bright teeth and a charming set of dimples.

Maybe *adorable* doesn't cover it.

"H-h-hi," I manage, looking away from his beautiful eyes.

I know I haven't got much of a backbone in general, but I don't usually lose the ability to speak complete words. There's something about him, about the whole package, that makes my skin tingle all over.

I've never reacted like this to a boy before. Sure, I've had my share of crushes and loves from afar, and even a quasi sort of boyfriend freshman year. None of them caused this whole-body reaction.

"This is Milo," Thane says, seemingly oblivious to my transformation into girl drool, thankfully. "He's a goalie."

Holy goalie.

Well, soccer explains Milo's presence. Thane may be quiet and shy and reserved in real life, but he comes alive on the soccer field. He's a completely different person when he's chasing down a ball or taking aim at the goal. Soccer is practically his life.

He says he doesn't want to play professionally. I don't know why not. I'm pretty sure he could if he wanted to.

"We have physics together," Milo says, dropping into the chair at the head of the table. "Homework on the first day." He shakes his head. "What kind of teacher does that? Pure evil, I'm telling you."

Thane slips through the kitchen to tell Mom he's home, and I'm still struck silent by Milo's presence when my brother gets back. Thane takes the chair across the table from me and pulls out his textbook. He grumbles, "Homework."

"Uh, yeah," I say, my brain suddenly demanding that I figure out a way to stay here at this table. No matter what. "Me too."

Wait. Why did I say that? I don't have any homework. I don't even have any textbooks. I'm losing my mind.

"We were going to do our homework and then, after dinner, go on a tour of the neighborhood. I'm kind of an expert." Milo sets his homework out on the table. "You interested?"

Uh, yeah!

No, keep it cool, Grace. Don't act like a total freakazoid.

“Sure,” I say, forcing myself to sound casual and not insta-stalker scary. “Sounds fun.”

Milo smiles and then flips open his physics book and starts on his homework. I glance up to find Thane staring at me, his dark-gray eyes unreadable. I raise my brows. He shifts his attention to his textbook.

After living in the same house for so long, I’m pretty much used to Thane’s odd, silent behavior. If he has something to say, he’ll say it. He just doesn’t have much to say very often. I shrug it off and instead focus on trying to find something in my backpack that can pass for homework.

Finding nothing, I dart to my room and grab my laptop off the desk. I can always find something to do with a computer.

Back at the table, I wake up my laptop and click open the word processor. In a new document, I start composing a list of things I want to change about my life. Starting with finding the ability to talk to cute boys.

I’m a little amazed that Mom approved this evening field trip. Thrilled, but amazed. She’s always been a little more on the overprotective-of-her-chicks side, and letting us both out into the big bad city after dark is uncharacteristic.

But then again, I’m sure she and Dad could use a night alone. They haven’t had a moment of peace since we started packing up the old house.

Plus we both have cell phones, bus passes, and—I steal a glance at Milo—a native guide. Of course, Mom didn’t know that, instead of walking around our neighborhood, we’d catch the bus heading to Fisherman’s Wharf to join the sea of tourists.

“Coach Guerrera likes to run the forwards into the ground for the first week,” Milo tells Thane as the bus bounces down the street. “But after that he lets up. I think he just wants to weed out the quitters.”

Thane nods.

Apparently that is enough of an answer for Milo, because he keeps on talking soccer. “He used to play professionally in Argentina, so he’s got the legs to back up his demands.”

I kind of tune out the words. Other than to watch Thane play, soccer is not really of interest to me.

Milo, on the other hand, is definitely of interest. And talkative—especially when Mom was peppering him with questions over dinner. Already I know he is a Bay Area native, is a senior like Thane, has three older sisters, and hates mushroom pizza and avocado. Oh well, he can't be one-hundred-percent perfect.

With each bump in the road, Milo's dark-brown curls bounce as if gravity has no control over them. It makes me smile every time.

"This is our stop," Milo says as the bus pulls up in front of a hotel.

I jump up to follow him and Thane to the door, not wanting to get stuck on a bus for a second time today. The street we're on is practically deserted, but one block north we step into a churning ocean of people, all ages and sizes and nationalities.

Distracted from my Milo watching, I gawk at the bustle of activity. There are street performers dressed as break-dancing robots or playing unrecognizable exotic instruments beneath giant crab sculptures. A woman in a long, exotic print dress with a shawl over her head tries to give me something, but Milo waves her off. He doesn't stop the man who hands me a brochure for a Bay cruise. It's utter chaos, but somehow everything flows perfectly together, like some kind of crazy, hectic ballet.

I'm surrounded by energy and I try to absorb as much as I can.

I follow the boys onto the pier, sticking close so we don't get separated. I'm pretty sure I'd never find them again. As we push through the Thursday-night crowd, I marvel at all the shops: seashells and pearls, souvenirs, socks, bath salts, candy, and crystals, restaurants serving seafood and ice cream and a hundred kinds of crepes.

No wonder this is such a popular tourist attraction.

"Watch out," Milo says, tugging me against his side as a tourist with a camera the size of my head nearly knocks me over. "You okay?" he asks.

I nod, dazzled by the feel of Milo against me. "Yeah, thanks."

"No problem." He beams, and for a second it feels like we're completely alone in the crowd.

"I'm hungry," Thane says, killing our moment.

"We just ate," I complain, mostly because Milo's attention—and his hand—is now off me.

"Me too." Milo agrees with Thane. "Everything here is overpriced for the tourists. Have you guys ever had dim sum?"

Had it? I've never even heard of it. Still, even though I know it's a bonehead answer, I'm on the verge of saying, *All the time,* because I don't want Milo to think I'm an uncultured hick. "Sure—"

Before I can finish, Thane says, "No."

"Excellent!" Milo's eyes light up brighter than before, and I'm really glad I didn't get the chance to fib.

"—I haven't," I finish quietly.

The look Thane throws me suggests he knew what I'd actually been about to say.

"Then I'll get to introduce you to it." Milo starts walking back in the direction we've come from and then off to the west. "The best all-night dim sum in town is only a cable car ride away."

I have to practically jog to keep up with his long strides. We cross to a dead-end street where a line of people stand waiting. They're all looking expectantly up the hill. I turn and see an ancient-looking cable car gliding down toward the dead end.

When I knew for sure we'd be moving to San Francisco, I researched the city online. I read a lot about the cable cars and their history and construction. I know the ropes and brakes are supposed to be safe, but I'm not entirely convinced. As I watch the people climb off and the car execute a complicated, man-powered turnaround, I'm getting a little apprehensive.

"Don't worry," Milo says quietly in my ear. "It's fun."

A warm, melty feeling spreads from my ear to the rest of my body. I smile and let him lead me to a seat while he and Thane stand, hanging out over the street. I look around and see that other riders are hanging out over the street too, but it doesn't make me any less nervous.

My eyes stay squeezed tightly shut most of the ride, so I don't remember much. There are a lot of jerks and stutters, and one time, when the car stops for a couple minutes, I hear a lot of shouting. I force one eye open and find Thane and Milo gone. Panicked, I lean out to search for them, only to find them—and a bunch of other passengers—actually *pushing* the car up the track. I keep my eyes open long enough for Thane and Milo to return to their spots, and then clamp them shut again.

Two stops later, as the car slowly climbs up a hill, I feel a warmth on my cheek just before Milo whispers, "You're going to miss the best part."

Despite my fear, I force my eyes open. For a second, Milo fills my vision. Then he leans back and reveals the view. We're at an intersection at the high point of a hill. Straight in front of me is a narrow street leading steeply down to a wider one, full of light and lanterns and activity. It's beautiful.

I smile at Milo for making me open my eyes.

I smile even bigger when he smiles back.

At the next stop, Milo's hand wraps around mine and tugs me to my feet. We've survived. Next time, I'll keep my eyes open the whole time.

"This is the world-famous Chinatown," he says, still holding my hand as he leads me down a very steep street.

My heart is racing, and not just because of the harrowing ride.

"And this," he says, pulling up in front of a glass storefront full of hanging meats and birds and unidentifiable things, "is the world's best dim sum parlor."

Although I can sort of see through the windows, they have layers of dirt caked at the corners, as if every so often someone grabs a rag to wipe only the centers. It doesn't exactly scream Great Place to Eat. Or even No Health Code Violations.

Milo throws the door open wide, flashes me a brilliant grin, and says, "Wait until you taste it."

Shoving my hesitations about the sanitary conditions aside, I follow Thane through the door and to a once-white Formica table with chipped edges. I take the seat opposite Thane, which means that—deep breath—Milo is sitting next to me. My blood is pounding in my ears, and I have to make the hostess repeat her request three times before I finally hear her ask, "Hot tea?"

"Yes, please," I say, ducking to hide my blush.

"No menus?" Thane asks.

"Not with dim sum," Milo explains. "The waiters will bring around trays of dishes, and if we see any we like, we get them." He spins a small piece of paper beneath his finger. "They stamp this order sheet to keep track of what we eat."

"Sounds complicated," I manage.

"It's great," Milo promises with a wink.

I’m not so sure. But when the first trayful of goodies comes by, my mouth waters at the wonderful smells. It’s like I never even ate dinner.

“Barbecue pork buns are the best,” Milo says, pointing to a metal tin containing three puffy white balls of dough. “Just don’t eat the paper stuck to the bottom.”

The waiter sets the tin on our table, pulls a stamp from his apron, and marks a symbol onto our order ticket.

“Oh,” I say, eyeing the pork buns. “I, um—”

“Grace is vegetarian,” Thane explains, so I don’t have to.

Milo gives me a serious look. Great, now he thinks I’m some kind of hippie-granola weirdo. No, I’m just eco-conscious and doing my part to lighten my footprint. I wave a mental good-bye to my very slim chance with him.

But then he says, “Why didn’t you say something?”

He calls the waiter back over, and soon there is a tin of doughy buns—these filled with barbecued veggies—sitting next to the pork.

“Thanks,” I say, and then drop my gaze to the food. Cute and considerate. As if Milo weren’t already my dream guy.

It takes only a quick tutorial from Milo for me to manage the chopsticks well enough to pick up my bun and lift it to my mouth.

“Uh-oh,” he says, as I’m about to take a bite. He reaches toward me and, for a heartbeat, I think he’s going to touch my cheek. Instead, he peels a thin piece of waxed paper off the bottom of my veggie bun. “Trust me, this does not add to the experience.”

I laugh at his teasing comment, but inside, my heart is doing cartwheels. *Play it cool, Grace.* Don’t want him to think I’m totally boy-illiterate.

As if I’m totally together, I lift the bun the rest of the way to my mouth and am about to bite in when a repulsive smell washes over me.

Instant nausea.

I clap my free hand over my mouth as the bun drops and rolls, forgotten, to the floor.

Milo asks, “What’s wrong?”

“Grace?” Thane’s jaw clenches into a block of stone. “What is it?”

If I weren’t on the verge of heaving the remains of Mom’s veggie stew, I’d appreciate Thane’s protectiveness. He’s always been that way, ready to

throw himself into anything if he thinks I'm in danger. But then I guess that's what big brothers are for.

At this moment, though, it's all I can do to keep my stomach contents where they belong. I close my eyes and shake my head.

"We should go," Thane says.

Milo nods. "You get her outside and I'll pay the bill."

"No," I whisper, swallowing down the nausea as best I can. I don't want to ruin this night. "I'm—I'll be fine. Just give me a—"

The front door to the restaurant opens with a whine and the stench hits me tenfold. I feel my eyes roll back as my body tries to reject the smell. Or to protect me from whatever's causing it. I've never had such a violent reaction to an odor before.

"Maybe we should—" I force my eyes open, but instead of Milo's adorable face or my brother's strong one, my gaze focuses on the *thing* that has just walked in the front door. The creature.

The body looks like a normal man, with arms and legs and everything in between. The head, though. . . . It's the head of a bull.

I'm not joking. A man with the head of a bull has just walked into an all-night dim sum restaurant as if it were normal.

I look at Thane for reassurance, hoping the panic I'm feeling shows in my eyes, telling him everything he needs to know. He turns to look at the door then back at me, jaw clenched and eyes wide. "Let's go."

I nod.

"What's going on?" Milo turns and looks too. "Do you two know that guy?"

"Guy?" I choke. Is he blind? Can't he see?

For that matter, can't everyone see? Why isn't anyone screaming or running away? Slowly, I scan the rest of the tables. No one else seems to have taken notice of the man-bull, who is now crossing the main floor and heading for the back room.

I look at Thane, certain he must have seen it.

But no, the look in his eyes now is simply concern for me. Did I just imagine the look of recognition I saw a moment ago? Milo doesn't see it, and neither does Thane. No one does. I'm the only person who saw a slobbering beast instead of a man.

Which can only mean one thing.

“I’m just—” I shake my head. “I don’t feel great.”

Both boys nod, as if it’s totally normal and logical and not at all out of the ordinary, when it’s anything but. There’s only one possible explanation for this hallucination. I must be going crazy.